STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
The Annals of Iowa

Volume 47 | Number 1 (Summer 1983) pps. 73-74

Prairie City, Iowa: Three Seasons at Home

ISSN 0003-4827

Prairie City, Iowa: Three Seasons at Home, by Douglas Bauer. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979. pp. 330. $10.95.

Many people experience a yearning to seek their childhood domain in order to "find" themselves, to reorient their lives, or just to understand their immediate past. Some experience this curious need late in their lives, others, like Douglas Bauer, at a young age (29). Some decide to write about their personal past as glowing trips through history (a "those-were-the-days" book); others, like Bauer, avoid this nostalgic trap. He has produced a gripping, sometimes backhandedly judgmental, but loving view of his childhood setting. He does it by splicing together essays concerning his personal experience with current views of this Jasper County community—all with a writer's peculiar powers of observation.

Fortunately, *Prairie City, Iowa: Three Seasons at Home* is not another dreary trip down memory lane, and that is why historians, especially those concerned with Iowa or midwestern studies, should read it. Armed with a sensitivity to Iowa's tradition (if not so much to its history) Bauer creates an interesting work useful to historians today, and perhaps vitally important to historians of succeeding generations studying twentieth-century small town life in Iowa.

As a writer Bauer does not take one of the few limited approaches to a situation or problem that historians have trained themselves in doing. Instead, he writes about Prairie City the way it impresses him and the characters he discusses are presented with feeling, rather than through interpretations of data or in relation to a particular trend of a particular time. Bauer experiences Prairie City; he does not do research on it.

Bauer introduces the book with his own story: a writer who grew up in Prairie City, attended high school there, graduated from Drake University, worked in Des Moines, and moved to Chicago as a *Playboy* editor. A few years and a broken marriage later, Bauer returned home to Prairie City where his parents still resided. He rented a house, took on a number of local jobs, and reacquainted himself with the town. He merely writes of what he sees, hears, touches, and does in a series of interrelated essays. Some of these essays flow like corn kernels spilling from a grain chute. He covers any aspect of life in the town: its softball team, the Prairie City Lions; its misfits and unfortunates and how the town deals with them; a family holiday gathering; the fine art of painting a car according to his friend, Cookie; the great description of an Iowa soul-food meal cooked by his mother; stories of his own youthful insecurities; and the

peculiarities, profundities, and conventionalities of Prairie City's denizens.

Historians studying the role of formal institutions in small towns will read with interest of the town's mayoral election and Bauer's report of a city council session. The city's newspaper takes a special place: It does not disseminate news; rather, it serves to legitimize the stream of gossip which flows from the bars and other eateries such as the Please-U-Cafe and the Cardinal Inn.

The real stuff of the book is people, their ways, their sometimes parochial attitudes, their work, their play, their outward pessimism, and their fundamental optimism. One of the most telling points Bauer makes concerns their optimism. One suspects he has changed his initial attitude toward his neighbors by the book's end. Bauer sketches a fair share of pessimistic, cynical town characters. At the end of *Prairie City* he discovers an historically enduring optimism in its people, marked by mere facades of negativity:

> As much as farmers show their suspicion of the skies, and speak of weather, government and the world's markets as living adversaries, they also assume each year a virginal faith. They place. . . .seeds into the ground, thinly cover them, and go away, leaving them unattended and exposed. A trust—more essential than rich land. . . .is required for farming; an almost organic trust that cities have long lost or perhaps never had.

IOWA STATE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT JACK LUFKIN

Wichita: The Early Years, 1865-1880, by H. Craig Miner. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. pp. xi, 201. Photographs, notes, index. $17.50.

H. Craig Miner has undertaken the challenging responsibility of writing an analytical "urban biography" of Wichita, Kansas. An important Great Plains regional metropolis, Wichita grew from an uninviting trading post into an agribusiness, airplane production, and energy center. Miner, a professional historian at Wichita State University, is the author of three previous books and many articles on the American West. His *Wichita: The Early Years, 1865-1880* is the first of two volumes. He sees the early years as a distinct whole: "frontier Wichita was not a romantic anomaly related to the modern metropolis only in the sharing of a name; the commercial foundations of the present city were established during the first fifteen years, as were the local attitudes that served it through the time of airplanes and oil derricks" (p. xi). His account of frontier Wichita deals with the role of the